

It's no longer the days of world exploration, imperialism, and wars for independence – at least not in the U.S. The West has been explored, Alaska purchased, a Constitution written, and boundaries drawn. All those heroic leaders who laid the groundwork for our great country live only in books. In short, all the exciting stuff has already happened.

But, perhaps pessimism has made us nearsighted. Though many of our present institutions seem stable – or even stagnant – the truth is the laws aren't fixed, the borders aren't permanent. A good reminder of this comes from that unassuming, southernmost community in San Luis Obispo County that is standing up to the status quo: Nipomo. Notice the term community. No, Nipomo is not a city. Not yet. Like Cambria, Avila, and San Miguel in San Luis Obispo County, and Los Alamos, Orcutt, Santa Ynez, and, until recently, Goleta, in Santa Barbara County, Nipomo is just another unincorporated community. Nipomo is particularly interesting, however, because its borders have never really been defined, its status is unknown by many, and its recent growth is setting it on a path toward cityhood.

According to Katcho Achadjian, the Fourth District Supervisor for the County of San Luis Obispo, Nipomo is like a child who has outgrown its car seat and wants to get behind the wheel of its own destiny. If Nipomo were to incorporate, they would get a seat on the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG) as well as many county-wide boards, like water and transportation, thus having a greater voice and representation in the county (at present, Nipomo has only one representative voice in five on the County Board, and no official representatives on county-wide boards). Theoretically, cityhood would also reinforce Nipomo with local leadership and municipal services, making the community better-represented and more efficiently served.

At a recent incorporation workshop at the Nipomo Community Service District (NCS D), the excitement, bustle, and anxiety that come with carving out your own destiny were bubbling over. Nipomo's leading voices of Independence and Self-determination came from Mike Eisner and lawyer Guy Murray,

co-chairs of the Nipomo Incorporation Sub Committee of the South County Advisory Council (SCAC), and others who have forged a team of educated, qualified, and determined advocates for creating a City of Nipomo. The reason for incorporation, according to Murray and others, is that it gives the community control over development rather than leaving big decisions to the county, which may or may not vote with the rural-minded South County Area Plan.

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A good example is the county's approval of a low-cost housing project, which, according to Murray, was not in alignment with the community's wishes. Another is the steadily impacted Tefft Street commercial district. While offering the supermarkets, drugstores, and fast food restaurants for which many were driving to Santa Maria or Arroyo Grande, it also crams virtually all of Nipomo's major commerce into one section of town where traffic, highway, and pedestrians converge.

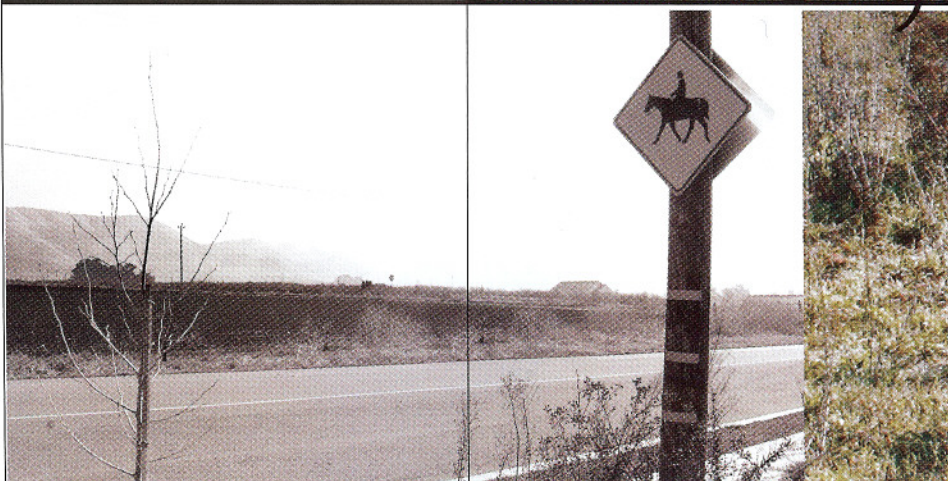
Achadjian, like many, respects and supports the initiative given that Nipomo can come up with enough money to succeed. This means that incorporated Nipomo must make enough

sales tax revenue to support all the services it would take over from the county such as paying for the maintenance of the Nipomo Community Park, one of the largest and most expensive parks in the county. Other services, like police protection, land use regulation, and building inspection that are now provided by the county and not directly transferred from the existing NCS D could be developed within Nipomo or contracted from the county.

Mike Winn, current president of the NCS D Board, says his impression of NCS D polls taken three years ago is that “Economic feasibility is the only continuing unknown, but the eventual certainty of incorporation is unchallenged.” The big question now is *when?* The preliminary feasibility report in 2005, prepared by the Davis Company for the NCS D, estimated that the revenue level was still far off. The deficit estimate, however, overlooked major revenue-producing projects now underway, and the 2005 sales tax figures reached a revenue bracket two years ahead of the Davis Report's projections.

With these current trends, it seems incorporation is really just a matter of

NIPOMO,



community support now. By educating the community about the benefits of becoming their own city, Murray, Eisner, and others hope to avoid the mistakes that Cambria made in their long, drawn out, and unsuccessful attempt at incorporating. Had the community in Cambria been more aware 20 or 30 years ago, they may not be in the pickle in which they find themselves now. The pickle's official name is Revenue Neutrality, and its tenets are that Cambria would have to pay back to the county any of the revenue it would take away by becoming its own city – a legal phenomenon Murray likens to paying alimony. Since Cambria makes so much money for the county now – with hotel taxes and sales taxes – it would be prohibitively costly for them to “divorce”; whereas, had they incorporated earlier on, before the Revenue Neutrality act and before they became such a cash cow, they would have had their freedom and control for a much lower rate.

Cambria and Goleta (which is now incorporated, but paying millions in alimony to Santa Barbara County) make such good examples, because Nipomo is still at the stage of development and growth where they could

secede without having to pay back.

Thus far, there has been very minimal negative feedback from the community. One particular section, the Cypress Ridge community, does not want to be included in the area incorporated – a wish the committee plans to honor in their proposed borders so as not to affect the whole movement with their negative vote. Other concerned citizens voiced worries about property taxes rising (which turns out to be a non-issue, since they can not be altered by the new city's officials without the community's voted approval), zoning changes, and potential downsides to local control (as witnessed in Los Osos recently in their CSD and sewer debacle).

Other worries stem from the widespread fear of growth and development in a community that cherishes its rural lifestyle. The committee put this argument to rest by saying that development will continue whether incorporation succeeds or not; the difference is that the proposed city would hold the wheel to impede, encourage, and generally steer that development in the direction that is best for the community.

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